



CANADIAN HIGH COMMISSION

Canada House at 80



Government of Canada
High Commission of Canada

Gouvernement du Canada
Haut-commissariat du Canada

Canada

● Union Club circa 1924



● Original Union Club's bow window removed



"Do you know that some people in Ottawa have twice suggested that we sell this building? I said, 'Over my dead body. It's the best piece of real estate in the world.'"

Paul Martin (Snr),
15th High Commissioner,
1974–1979

Canada House at 80

When King George V turned the key that opened Canada House in 1925, it was the culmination of a dream and the beginning of an era. The dream belonged to Peter Larkin, the Montreal tea merchant who became Canada's fifth High Commissioner to London (1921–1930). Armed with a Privy Council recommendation that all government activities in London should be consolidated under one roof, Larkin resolved to move out of the Dominion's cramped offices in Victoria Street and into an all-Canadian government building in the heart of London. And so, dressed in his signature grey spats and top hat and armed with the same tenacity he had used to form his Salada tea company, Larkin went shopping for a "truly Canadian building".

After several bids fell through, including one for the hotel that later became South Africa House, Larkin's attention returned to his first choice — the venerable Union Club. This gentleman's club in Trafalgar Square, built between 1824 and 1827 in the fashionable Greek Revival style, had been designed by Robert Smirke, a leading architect of the day. (Smirke also designed the British Museum and the Covent Garden Theatre, now the Royal Opera House.)

"Canada has now been fortunate enough to secure what may well be regarded as the finest site in London, and being in London, the finest in the world," Prime Minister Mackenzie King proudly told the House of Commons in 1923.

The Union Club occupied the south side of a building originally conceived as a single structure — the Royal College of Physicians occupied the north side. Reputed to be one of London's most popular clubs, the Union boasted an illustrious membership of powerful men including the Duke of Wellington; Sir Robert Peel; Cecil Rhodes; playwright Richard Sheridan, who wrote *The School for Scandal*; and novelist Charles Dickens, who died the day he was elected to full membership.

Through Larkin's arduous efforts, in July 1923 the Government of Canada finally secured the Union Club premises (with a 40-year lease) for £223,000. Prime Minister Mackenzie King was delighted, proudly telling the House of Commons that summer that Canada had secured possibly the "finest site in London" and thus, to him, the "finest in the world".



Over the next two years, extensive renovations to transform Canada House into a high-profile showpiece proceeded under the guidance of architect Septimus Warwick, who had come to prominence through his building designs in Australia, Canada and the UK. Making way for adequate office space

● Mackenzie King and Peter Larkin (right) in London

and sumptuous reception rooms, out went the bar and the billiard, card and smoking rooms. The Trafalgar Square front was refaced with stone to match that of the adjoining Royal College of Physicians, forming a distinctive and unified facade. A six-storey wing of offices was added at the rear, and a bow window once favoured by George IV was replaced by an elegant new entrance in Cockspur Street framed by four Ionic columns.

Carpets and desks, maple and birch floors and a host of other fittings were imported from Canada, including the emblematic maple leaf, which was worked into the entrance doors. The fine furnishings followed, painstakingly acquired by Peter Larkin's wife Jean, who made the rounds of auction houses and antique shops for just the right sofas, chairs, tables, chandeliers and paintings, all paid for by the Larkins. No detail escaped their attention. Or that of the prime minister, who insisted that, while the building would be known as Canada House, only "Canada" would be inscribed in gold above the entrance.

On June 29, 1925, with much fanfare, King George V and Queen Mary arrived at Canada House for the official opening. Before a sea of spectators, Peter Larkin and Septimus Warwick greeted the King and Queen with a set of three keys — gold, silver and nickel — to open the heavy bronze doors. Also present were a Royal Canadian Mounted Police honour guard and the Duke of Connaught (a former Governor General of Canada) and his daughter Lady Patricia Ramsay, after whom Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry was named. King George told a cheering crowd that the building befitted Canada's representative in the UK.

Waiting inside were the British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Mrs Baldwin; Mr and Mrs Rudyard Kipling; Mr and Mrs Lloyd George; Lady Beaverbrook; Mr Ramsay MacDonald; Mr WS Allward, sculptor of the Vimy Memorial; and a host of ambassadors from Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Japan and the United States.



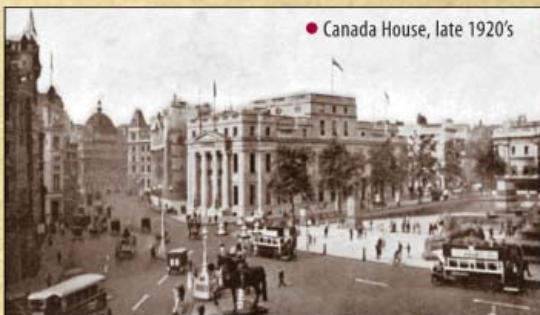
● Peter Larkin and Queen Mary descend the steps at the opening of Canada House, 1925. HM King George V is pictured at the top of the steps

Country Life remarked as follows on the opening of Canada House in 1925: "It is difficult to be temperate in praise of those responsible for this exemplary addition to the beauties of London." The magazine described the building as being, inside and out, an ultimate example of "good manners in architecture".



• View of general office of the High Commissioner's staff (ground floor)

The *Yorkshire Post* was similarly effusive: "It is a finely conceived enterprise which places the Dominion's 'shop window' in the very heart of the Metropolis."



After unlocking the great doors, the King and Queen toured the premises, which so impressed His Majesty that he is said to have whispered that the High Commissioner's office was quite the finest in London, certainly better than his own. Magazines and newspapers in the UK agreed, one calling Canada House an "exemplary addition to the beauties of London".

Over the next decade, Canada House became a mecca for countless visitors and the launching point for a number of Canada–UK financial and political initiatives. The building also embodied tremendous glamour, particularly for Canadian expatriates in the 1930s, thanks in no small part to its prime location. This was also the era that saw the rise of luminaries such as Marcel Cadieux, Jules Léger, Douglas LePan and Georges Vanier, under the tutelage of High Commissioner Vincent Massey.



"The Canadian group was very close," Mary Graham, friend of former High Commissioner Charles Ritchie, recalled in 1998. "Everybody knew everybody then and Canada had a glamorous international image. Trafalgar Square and Canada House were at the very heart of a golden square mile where everything happened. The Bank of Montreal, the oldest Canadian bank in London, used to be there and you'd cash your cheques there and then walk over to Canada House where there was a reading room. It was a cosy place and there you could read your hometown newspaper which was a tremendous thing for Canadians living here."

"So far, Canada House has been fortunate," Pearson wrote in a dispatch to Ottawa during the Blitz. "We have had two high explosive bombs — both at night — so near that it is surprising they did not shatter parts of the building."

After Canada declared war on Germany on September 10, 1939, Canada House shifted to wartime mode. Trade commissioners now focused on war-related economic matters including the shipping and delivery of Canadian weapons.

Then came the Blitz. In October 1940, bombs fell near Canada House, one detonating only 20 yards away from the window of Lester B. Pearson — then first secretary to the Canadian High Commissioner and later Prime Minister.

Life at Canada House intensified with the arrival of Canadian troops and it became a home away from home for thousands of servicemen who went there for help, advice and to locate loved ones



● An early photo of the ground floor foyer



● Inside Canada House during World War II

overseas. Many found solace at the Beaver Club — a popular retreat famous for its doughnuts — which was set up in 1940 by Vincent Massey's wife, Alice, who had earlier founded the War Emergency Committee of the Canadian Women's Club. Massey also held Saturday-night parties in Canada House for troops going to or coming from the front lines.

Alice Massey's devotion to the Canadian troops, exemplified by the thousands of letters she personally wrote to their families, wives and fiancées back in Canada, became legendary. It was also understandable, as the Masseys' two sons had suffered directly as a result of the war: Lionel was a prisoner of war in Greece, and Hart had been wounded in an air raid.

After the war, activities at Canada House normalised, and attention once again turned to promoting Canada in the UK and the Commonwealth under the leadership of successive



● The Canadian Women's Club dispensed tea to the troops from a wagon parked outside Canada House, 1941



high commissioners, including Norman Robertson, Dana Wilgress and George Drew. It was George Drew, who in 1961 oversaw the acquisition of the old US Embassy in Grosvenor Square, now Macdonald House, which today houses most of the High Commission's staff. Two years later, Canada acquired the premises of the Royal College of Physicians, which



• HM The Queen's Coronation procession passing a decorated Canada House, 1953

adjoined Canada House, paying £373,000 for a 99-year lease and enabling the High Commission to expand to occupy the entire west end of Trafalgar Square.

Following the acquisition, new work began to convert the interiors of the two buildings into one. With it came a commitment to bilingualism, and the statue of General Wolfe, which rested outside the High Commissioner's office, was paired with a companion statue of General Montcalm, "because you cannot deny a country's history," said High Commissioner Lionel Chevrier.

Over the next 30 years, Canada House became a home away from home for a generation of Canadian visitors and backpackers, who revelled in their new Canadian flag, took refuge from the London rain and caught up with the news from home.

• Paul Martin Sr., Head of Canadian delegation and Secretary of State for External Affairs, meeting British Prime Minister Harold Wilson (right), April 1967





● Her Majesty The Queen Mother with Jean Casselman Wadds, Canadian High Commissioner

But this period also saw the gradual deterioration of Canada House, with many of the building's mechanical and electrical systems needing replacement. In 1993, Canada House was closed as a cost-cutting measure of the Mulroney government, which also planned to sell it.

But High Commissioner Royce Frith had other ideas. It was Frith who convinced Jean Chrétien's incoming Liberal government to reverse the decision of the Mulroney Conservatives. The Frith plan was also aided by another factor. Since the lease could not be sold without a complete renovation of the listed building, it only made sense to retain Canada House and make it better than ever.

In early 1997, a 15-month, £6.8-million restoration of Canada House began. Its purpose was to make the building more functional while restoring its architectural heritage.



Roland Kemp/Diplomat Magazine



Roland Kemp/Diplomat Magazine

What emerged was something outstanding. Ripping away the work of previous designers, the architects found four skylights and a magnificent dome. As walls were torn down, the dim honeycomb of offices gave way to sunlit spaces. Intricate railings were restored, and the Brazilian mahogany and glass wall at the entrance to the library was recovered along with a set of carved wooden doors in one of the grand reception rooms. The decorative late-Georgian plasterwork of the High Commissioner's office was restored to its Larkin-era glory, and the effect was further bolstered by the return of many of the tables, chairs, desks, clocks, mirrors and objets d'art the Larkins had so generously left behind. Six new chandeliers made by the Queen's chandelier-maker were also hung in the grand salons. And, using a 1925 photo from *Country Life* magazine as a guide, a carved wooden vestibule that had disappeared was rebuilt. The results would have delighted Larkin.

Other improvements were made, too. These included the addition of air conditioning, a comfortable cinema, a state-of-the-art kitchen and computer stations with internet connections. Backpackers could again use Canada House as an address, only this time it was electronic.

In May 1998, some 73 years after her grandparents officially opened Canada House, Queen Elizabeth II returned for its grand re-opening. Just like the first opening, the re-opening was a star-studded event. The Queen was surrounded by various Canadian celebrities including Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, Yousef Karsh, Bryan Adams, Paul Gross, Robert LePage, Atom Egoyan, Governor General Adrienne Clarkson and her husband John Ralston Saul, and members of Cirque du Soleil.

Days later, Canada House was again open for business, providing a home for consular and passport services, academic and cultural programmes, and a public information service. Canada's jewel in Trafalgar Square also resumed its role as a most distinguished venue for conferences, receptions, launches and vernissages where Canadians and Britons could meet.

Today, Canada House remains a potent symbol of Canada, just as it did at its beginning some 80 years ago. Now, as then, this grande dame of Trafalgar Square still oversees Canadian interests in the UK and still welcomes visitors, ever faithful to the promise made by Mackenzie King to war-weary Britons at Mansion House in 1941: "We will be with you till the end."



